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State to revise phosphate mine standards

Discussions come in wake of EPA list

water and waste clay deposits of phosphate mines.

The revision is in response to a draft U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report that found one former phosphate mine, which has been reclaimed as the state Tenoroc Fish Management Area near Lakeland, is contaminated with enough radioactivity and toxic metals to qualify as a "national priority" for the federal Superfund cleanup program, the DEP confirmed this week.

The Tenoroc site is one of 21 Central Florida phosphate mines or chemical plants on the EPA's list of potential Superfund clean up sites. The sites on the list are to be evaluated to see if they qualify for the EPA's National Priority List. Those sites would then be eligible for millions of dollars in federal funding.

Levels of contamination at Tenoroc meet the criteria for the National Priority List, according to Brad Jackson, EPA program administrator.

But the EPA is also delaying publishing a final report on the Tenoroc site until EPA administrators can establish a policy for how to respond to the contamination at all 21 phosphate sites, Jackson said.

The EPA recognizes that all 21 might qualify for Superfund cleanups, Jackson said. That would pose "major impacts" on state and federal financial resources, he said.

As a result, officials from the DEP, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Southwest Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Health, Florida Institute of Phosphate Research, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA are working to revise the standards for contamination at phosphate mine sites and reclaimed lands, confirmed Dee Ann Miller, spokeswoman for the DEP.

The EPA's draft report on Tenoroc states that radiation in some areas was 20 times

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normal background. The background levels were tested just off the mine site in the same general area.

Also, elevated levels of arsenic, barium, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, iron, lead and other metals were found at Tenoroc.

Several regional and state officials said they were unaware that 21 phosphate sites are listed as possible sources of contamination by the EPA. But they also were not particularly alarmed by the news.

"I haven't seen the list," said Brian Sodt, a chief planner for the Central Florida Regional Planning Council. "I haven't seen the criteria. This is news to me."

But Sodt added that 15 years ago he worked to permit the Oak Bridge development, an upscale residential community near Lakeland, on a reclaimed phosphate mine. Sodt said builders were required to install "monolithic" concrete slabs under houses to prevent radon gas from seeping in.

Sodt also cited several other similar upscale developments that were built on reclaimed phosphate mines in Polk County. He said the DEP addressed contamination concerns in the permitting process.

"It doesn't surprise me that (elevated radiation) would be in these areas because there is a higher level of radioactivity in this region," said Bob Vincent, a drinking water program supervisor for the Department of Health.

However, whether the contamination causes health concerns depends upon whether it exceeds state standards in drinking water, Vincent said. Since Tenoroc is at least 4 miles from municipal wells, it's unlikely the contamination could get into public drinking wells, he added.

However, Vincent also said he would discuss the EPA report with his supervisor to address public concerns.

Ron Silver, chief of permitting for the regional branch of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said he was also unaware that 21 phosphate sites are on the EPA's potential Superfund list.

He said he couldn't comment on whether that would raise concerns about permitting another 50,000 acres of phosphate mining, as is currently proposed.

"I don't know enough about it to comment directly," he said.


However, he pointed out that IMC Phosphates' Ona mine is in a final stage of permitting.

"If anybody has any information (pertaining to the proposed permit), please send it to us so we can consider it," he said.

By GREG MARTIN

Staff Writer

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